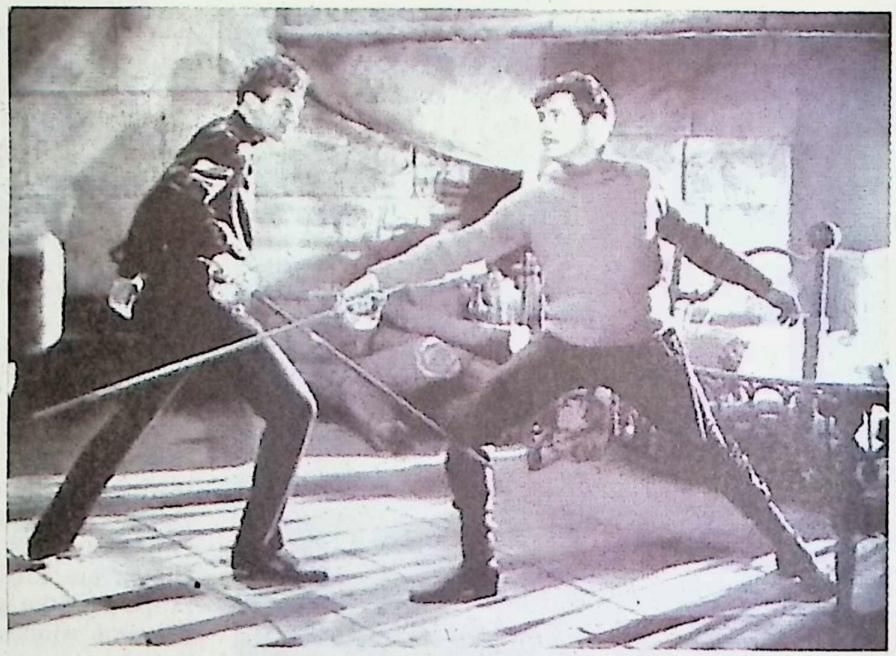


PUBLISHED in 1894, The Prisoner of Zenda by Anthony Hope tells the story of a man who has to impersonate a king to save an entire nation from falling prey to the evil designs of a few. The book also had a sequel, titled Rupert of Hentzau, which is also included in some editions of this novel.

The king in question is Rudolf V, the heir apparent of Ruritania, a kingdom between the German and Austrian empires. King Rudolf is unpopular with the common people, but supported by the aristocracy. His younger half-brother Michael, regarded as a champion of the poor, has no legitimate claim to the throne, but all the intent to capture it. In this regard, the book seems sympathetic with the dissolute despot Rudolf rather than the pro-poor Michael.

The Prisoner of Zenda

By Anthony Hope

When Michael has Rudolf abducted on the eve of his coronation, the protagonist Rudolf Rassendyll, a distant cousin of the royal family, has to impersonate the future king. There are plots and counter-plots, with Michael being assisted by his evil henchman Rupert of Hentzau, after whom the sequel is named. In the end, order prevails, Michael's plans are foiled and the rightful king is restored to his throne. However, by now the King's betrothed, Princess Flavia, has fallen in love with Rassendyll, but the lovers must part and Flavia must be content with the role of Queen of Ruritania.

This book has engendered several literary retellings, the most prominent of which would be Double Star by Robert Heinlein, which tells of the actor Lorenzo Smythe, who has to play the part of a statesman and comes to admire the man greatly. There have also been several film and television adaptations, as well as a musical. The sequel, Rupert of Hentzau, starts a few years after the point where the first book ends, and tells the story of Rassendyll coming back to Ruritania, but that is a story for another time.

